

Dramatic turn for hip-hop

Danny Hoch, 27, brings Gen-X air to one-man show

The words hip-hop and theater are not usually uttered in the same sentence. That is, unless solo artist Danny Hoch is doing the rapping.

The Brooklyn-born playwright/actor is the rapmaster of the modern stage. At 27, he

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On Theater

has been called the Eric Bogosian of the Gen-X crowd. His latest piece, "Jails, Hospitals & Hip-Hop," which plays Friday at UC Davis, riffs on the history of hip-hop and rap.

"I know there are people out there saying, 'Who is this white boy and why is he talking about hip-hop?'" says the fast-talking Hoch during a phone interview from New York.

"I was dissatisfied with the stories (in the theater) that were being told because they had nothing to do with my generation. I wanted to write about my version of the world, my city, my neighborhood, my community."

When Hoch put pen to paper, "the voices in my head" started spilling out and became the makings of his earlier one-man show "Some People." Like that piece, which brought Hoch an Obie Award and was shown on HBO, "Jails" takes colorblind casting to new heights.

In the play, Hoch dons his signature baseball cap and hurls himself into a series of characters, from a white wannabe rapper to a street vendor and an over-the-hill rap star named MC Enuf. Like a quick-change artist, Hoch easily switches accents, postures and lingo in a tour-de-force of street poetry. The show, which debuted at Berkeley Rep last year, opens in New York this spring.

So agile are his ethnic transmutations that Jerry Seinfeld tried to hire him to play a Latino pool cleaner named Ramone. Hoch turned down the high-profile "Seinfeld" cameo because he felt the role played into negative stereotypes.

"It was OK to play a clown and it was OK to play a Latino but it's not OK, for me, to play a Latino clown," he says. "My work is about shattering stereotypes. . . . I'm trying to bring traditionally peripheral characters center stage."

Hoch is no tourist to the hip-hop scene. His research for the show is his own life, the experiences he had growing up in New York and teaching conflict resolution to young people in



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AT A GLANCE

Jails, Hospitals & Hip-Hop

Will be performed at 8 p.m. Friday at the Main Theatre on the UC Davis campus. \$23; \$11.50 for students and children under 18. (530) 752-1915.

New York City jails.

"It's not like I'm on some authorial trip where I go out and research people," he says. "A lot of the characters I do are reflections of myself or people I've known."

In "Jails," Hoch refers to himself directly when he describes the Seinfeld incident. But he says that the sketch, which many critics found unfunny and self-aggrandizing, may not make the final cut. Since all his shows are eternally works in progress, Hoch can always cut the bits that don't work. In the world of theater, at least, he has complete control.

"I'm not in a rush to be a movie or TV star. That's not my goal," Hoch says. "If I can make a living and pay my rent, what do I need \$3 million for? I'd rather do stuff that's pertinent."

His stance against selling out, as well as his theatrical bravado, have earned him comparisons to soloists such as Anna Devereaux Smith, John Leguizamo and Bogosian. Bringing him to the Central Valley was a coup for UC Davis Presents.

"We love Danny. We want Danny," says B Street artistic

director Buck Busfield, a tad enviously.

Despite his stage success, Hoch is not turning up his hip-hop nose at all other media. He has acted in a few films, including Terrence Malick's upcoming "The Thin Red Line" with John Travolta and Sean Penn. He hopes working in the movies will help lure young people (his target audience) into seeing his theater piece. Nothing irks him more than the idea that theater is a high-culture relic for the idle rich.

"I want to invite young people to theater. I want to have cheap tickets and put up posters that look like record covers."

While getting slackers to the theater may sound like a pipe dream in our MTV world, it's a mistake to ignore the cross-over appeal of rap, whose aficionados hail from every age, race and class. Americans bought an estimated 57 million hip-hop albums in 1997 alone.

Even so, Hoch admits that he's carving out a new niche in the theater scene — the hip-hop monologue. Most twentysomethings, he says, love his brand of performance but have no clue what to call it.

"They say 'That was so cool. What was it, stand-up?' And I say, 'It's a play' and they say, 'No way.'"

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